

SRI LANKA'S DIPLOMATIC MISSION TO ROME IN THE FIRST CENTURY A.D.

The embassy, which is the subject of this chapter, was sent by the king of Sri Lanka and arrived in Rome sometime during the reign of the emperor Claudius, who ruled from A.D. 41-54. It is reported at length in an encyclopaedic Latin work, the *Natural History* of the Elder Pliny (Gaius Plinius Secundus), who was born in A.D. 23 or 24 and died during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. This work contains one of the longest ancient accounts of Sri Lanka or Taprobanê.¹

Pliny's account falls into two parts. The first part is based on information given by earlier writers, among whom he explicitly mentions Onesicritus, Megasthenes and Eratosthenes.² The second part is devoted to an account of the arrival of four ambassadors from Taprobanê and the information supplied by them, certain details of which are corroborated by the reports of western merchants.³

According to Pliny, the embassy from Taprobanê was occasioned by the accidental arrival there of a freedman of Annii Plocamus. After summarizing earlier information about the island, Pliny says :⁴

« So far the details are those recorded by the ancients. More accurate information came our way during the reign of Claudius when ambassadors actually arrived from that island. This happened as follows : A freedman of Annii Plocamus, who had bought from the Treasury the tax farm of the Red Sea, was sailing round Arabia. There he was carried along by winds from the north past Carmania, and on the fifteenth day made harbour at Hippuros in that island : and in consequence of the kind hospitality of the king he learned the native language thoroughly over a period of six months, and afterwards in reply to his questions described the Romans and Caesar. In what he heard the king got a remarkably good idea of their honesty, because among the captured money there were denarii which were of equal weight, although their various types indicated that they were issued by several persons. Encouraged to friendship chiefly by this he sent four ambassadors with Rachia as their leader ».

There follows a lengthy account of the physical, political and social conditions of the island, based on information supplied by the ambassadors and supported in part by reports of western merchants.

I. Date and Purpose of the Embassy

This narrative raises several problems. First of all, there is the question of the date of this event. Pliny says that it happened in the time of Claudius. This was generally accepted until David Meredith published two inscriptions found in the Wadi Meneh on the road from Coptos to Berenice.⁵ One of these inscriptions is in Latin, the other in Greek. Both were engraved by

1. Pliny, VI, 22, (24) 91-101, edited by J. André and J. Filliozat : 1980 ; English translation by H. Rackham in Loeb Edition. Cf. also the paraphrase by Solinus, 53, 1, f.
2. Pliny, VI, 81-83.
3. Pliny, VI, 84-91.
4. Pliny, VI, 84.
5. D. MEREDITH, 1953 : 37-40. The rare cognomen Plocamus is Greek and suggests Campanian origins. The Annii are heard of in Capua, Delos, Pergamum, and Athens during the second century B.C. One branch of the clan were among the *domi nobiles* of Puteoli, Roman port actively engaged in the commerce in eastern luxuries ; and

Lysas, the slave of a certain Publius Annius Plocamus. Both Greek and Latin inscriptions, dated 2nd and 5th July respectively, record that this slave was there in the 35th year of the Emperor. This emperor can only be Augustus, and the date is therefore A.D. 6.

The occurrence of the name of Annius Plocamus in such an appropriate context has prompted some scholars to assign the incident mentioned by Pliny to a time much earlier than the reign of Claudius.⁶ There is, of course, no proof that the references in the inscriptions and in Pliny are to the same Annius Plocamus, and it would be going too far indeed if one were to assume that the slave Lysas of the inscription was identical with the freedman of Annius Plocamus, mentioned by Pliny, and to conclude therefore that he carried on his business during the reign of Augustus.

Besides, we cannot overlook the fact that Pliny definitely says that the embassy arrived in Rome during the reign of Claudius. As Pliny was living in Rome during the late 30's and early 40's of the century, it is hard to question his veracity. Meredith thinks that the embassy probably came there during the first three years of Claudius' reign. It is even possible to conceive that Pliny himself had seen these visitors. He shows a particular interest in new information and does not hesitate to specify any change of conditions or recent additions to knowledge.⁷ Would he, then, have attributed to his own times events that occurred during the reign of Augustus, when he was not even born?

When Pliny describes Annius Plocamus as one who had bought the Red Sea vectigal, the implication is that he held this office at the time when the freedman reached Taprobanê. But the presence of Lysas in the Egyptian desert in A.D. 6, if his master was the same Plocamus, indicates that he must have had some interest in this area as early as that date.

This difficulty can be explained in more than one way. It could be argued that there were two people by the name of Annius Plocamus, representing two generations of a family resident in Egypt, and engaged in tax farming, and that the younger Annius inherited the vectigal from his father. Such hereditary offices were common in Egypt. As a possible parallel one may cite the case of the conductors of the *publicum portorii Illyrici*, among whom Antonii are particularly prominent.⁸ It must however be pointed out that Pliny speaks of Annius Plocamus as having bought the vectigal from the *fiscus*, a term which Pliny uses here probably in its general sense to mean the "imperial financial administration".⁹

The alternative is to suppose that Pliny's Annius Plocamus and the one of the inscription are identical. But here again there are two possibilities. One is that in A.D. 6 he was in Egypt, not as a tax farmer but in some other capacity, perhaps as a wealthy merchant engaged in private trading, and that by A.D. 43 he had taken to farming the Red Sea vectigal.

a freedman of P. Annius Plocamus is mentioned in an inscription from the site. Apart from the individual in Pliny, three Annii Plocami are mentioned in inscriptions. Cf. J.H. D'ARMS 1974 : 107 f., and 122-4 ; M.G. RASCHKE, 1978 : 644 with notes.

6. E.H. WARMINGTON in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1970, s.v. "Taprobanê" ; R.E.M. WHEELER, 1954 : 155-6 ; F.F. SCHWARZ, 1974 : 21-48.
7. Cf. for instance, Pliny, VI, 105 on India. In VI, 81 he had already sketched the growth of knowledge about Taprobanê. In the present passage (VI, 84) he is contrasting earlier information with what he has learned recently from the envoys.
8. M.G. RASCHKE, 1978 : n. 685.
9. A.H.M. JONES, 1950 : 25 ; P.A. BRUNT, 1966 : 84, where Brunt thinks that the reference is to the 25 percent customs duty at Red Sea ports.

The dates of the freedman's inscriptions interestingly correspond with the time of the year considered best for sailing from Egypt to India, using the summer monsoon.¹⁰ The allocation of the vectigal rights might well go to a merchant who had been working there for a long time, and had experience of the area. As Raschke has observed, Annius Plocamus may well have owned property in Egypt since land was frequently used as security in public contracts. We probably have here an interesting example of the combination of mercantile and bureaucratic careers — a combination well known in antiquity.¹¹

The second possibility is that Annius Plocamus may in fact have been holding the vectigal concession as early as A.D. 6, although this is not explicitly stated in the inscriptions. This means that he worked the Red Sea vectigal for at least 35 years. It may be argued that this is a very long time to hold an imperial concession. But Egypt was Augustus' preserve and exceptions were not out of place there. Long-term holdings of office were not unknown in Egypt, specially in the case of minor officers associated with finance. We hear of one Nicanor who held the right to the desert transport business between Coptus and the ports of Myos Hormos and Berenice for as much as 45 years (A.D. 5-50). Significantly, this period falls within the reigns of Augustus and Claudius.¹² Thus Plocamus' holding of the vectigal rights for over 35 years at this time is not an improbability.

The embassy must therefore be assigned to the reign of Claudius. The specific statement of Pliny is undoubtedly more worthy of trust than a number of implications derived from external evidence.

Some of those who are inclined towards an earlier date for the embassy have drawn our attention to a passage in the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa*¹³ where the *Mahāvamsa* says that king Bhatikabhaya had a net of coral prepared and set over the *cetiya* (i.e. the *Mahathupa*) the commentary clarifies, saying : « He had a net of coral prepared ; that is, he sent to the country of Romanukkha by sea and got down red coral and had a perfect net of coral made, suitable to be cast over ».

Geiger's dates for Bhatikabhaya, calculated according to the *Mahāvamsa*, are A.D. 38-66. Codrington and Paranavitana, sceptical of the accuracy of traditions of the chronicles concerning the regnal years of early kings, rearranged the dates as 27 B.C. to A.D. 7, a period which falls neatly within the relevant years of Augustus' principate, as required by the inscriptions. But Geiger's dating fits no less neatly within the reign of Claudius, as required by Pliny. In the absence of incontrovertible proof either for the suggested re-dating of the episode

10. D. MEREDITH, 1953 : 40.

11. M.G. RASCHKE, 1978 : 644, n. 815. Raschke cites the interesting career of two conductors of the *publicum portorii Illyrici* which indicate that the same individual could be in his lifetime (but not simultaneously) both procurator and conductor of vectigalia, viz. M. Antonius Fabianus, who was first *procurator XL Galliarum et portus and procurator argentariarum*, and afterwards conductor of the *portorium Illyrici*, and C. Antonius Rufus who was first *conductor publici portorii* and later procurator.

12. D. MEREDITH, 1953. Pliny's most recent editors, J. André and J. Filliozat (1980 : 113, n. 2 at VI, 84), contend that the text does not indicate that, at the time of his journey, the freedman was under the orders of his master, and suggest that he may have traded on his own with Carmania. Further, as he was journeying round Arabia, there could be no question of taxes. Accordingly, these scholars feel that the inscriptions only prove the existence of Plocamus in A.D. 6 and the arrival of his freedman in Sri Lanka before the accession of Claudius. Against this it may be asked whether Pliny would have gone out of his way to mention Annius Plocamus and his tax business if they had no connection with the story.

13. *Vamsatthapakasini* : 60, commenting on *Mahāvamsa* XXXIV, 47 ; cf. S. PARANAVITANA, in the *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*, vol. I, pt. 1. p. 45 ; E. PIERIS, 1962 : 18 ; see also F.F. SCHWARZ, 1974 : 36.

described by Pliny, or for that of the regnal years of Bhatikabhaya, I feel that the traditional interpretation of the sources, both western and indigenous, should be retained.

The Claudian date of the embassy would also explain the nature of its record. From Pliny's text it is clear that the ambassadors supplied information regarding the physical, political and social conditions of their country and that this information was diligently recorded and preserved. The implication is that what they said must have been of interest to the ruling authority in Rome. Now, Emperor Claudius was an antiquarian and historian of no mean authority. None of his works has survived, but they included a history of the reign of Octavian, a shorter history from the death of Julius Caesar, a history of the Etruscans written in Greek, and a history of Carthage. He therefore must have shown a particular interest in what the ambassadors had to say about their country.

According to Pliny, the immediate course of the embassy was that the king of Taprobanê was impressed by the integrity of the Roman currency. But it may well be that Pliny's fondness for the anecdote had made him miss the real purpose of the embassy, which may not have been sent for purely commercial reasons. If the ornament of coral was destined for the great religious edifice of his kingdom, the presumption must be that Bhatikabhaya, who is portrayed in the chronicles as a devoted and lavish patron of Buddhism would not regard such a mission as an ordinary commercial transaction. The purpose of importation and the quantity of coral required would call for negotiations at the highest level, i.e. of an official embassy. Pliny's interest in the information concerning Taprobanê given by the envoys nearly a generation previously disguises the essentially religious motive which inspired their mission.

Specific references to Rome and the Romans are late in Asian literature and are confined on the whole, to works on astronomy.¹⁴ Westerners are generally designated as "Yona". Thus the survival of the name "Romanukkha-rattham" in the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa* may well be an indication of the extraordinary importance attached to this mission and of its official nature.

As to the outcome of the embassy, in the absence of explicit evidence, one can only attempt a guess. The superior quality of the information regarding the island available to Ptolemy a century later¹⁵ is a definite indication of improved relations between Taprobanê and the West. Pliny mentions only two ports in Taprobanê, viz. Hippuros and Palaesimundum. Neither he nor his near contemporary, who wrote the *Periplus*, knows of any emporia on the island. Ptolemy, on the other hand, mentions a large number of ports and havens as well as two emporia, which he calls Modouttou and Tarakoru.

M.P. Charlesworth¹⁶ has observed that the *Periplus* mentions over twenty emporia altogether, while Ptolemy enumerates some sixty between Barygaza and the Ganges delta, apparently one emporium to serve each district or region. Charlesworth thinks that these are harbours, approved or designated either by a king's decree or by the provisions of a treaty as places where business with people of different nationality may be transacted lawfully, where lawful dues and taxes may be imposed, and where possibly foreigners resided with a garrison of soldiers or small police post. He refers to the statement of the *Periplus* that Leuke Kome ranks

14. Cf. W.E. CLARKE, 1937 : 350.

15. Ptolemy, VII, 4, 1 ff ; *Periplus*, 61 ; Pliny, VI, 84 and 86 ; compare with Ptolemy, VII, 4, 7.

16. M.P. CHARLESWORTH, 1951 : 139-40.

as a kind of emporium and that this is the reason why a tax collector and a centurion with a detachment are sent there.¹⁷

Regarding the places in India designated as emporia Charlesworth says, « I feel in fact that all these places are officially approved harbours arranged by mutual agreement between rulers in the empire and India reached by means of embassies ». It is interesting to speculate whether the two emporia on the island of Taprobanê, which are first mentioned by Ptolemy, were the result of negotiations conducted in Rome by the envoys of Bhatikabhaya. However, from the point of view of Sri Lanka at least, the purpose attributed to the embassy was a religious one, even though it may have been related to commercial transactions ; and the *Mahāvamsa* account of Bhatikabhaya's reign reveals how spectacularly this purpose was achieved.¹⁸

II. Problems Raised by the Narrative

Questions have been raised regarding certain details in the story. Since the *vectigal Maris Rubri* was levied in the ports of Roman Egypt, it has been asked, for instance, what the freedman was doing around Arabia ; whether he was sailing in pursuit of customs defaulters. Meredith suggested that he may have been engaged in some sort of commercial venture.¹⁹

De Laet, who accepts Rostovtzeff's view that the freedman was on his way to the Roman customs-house near Bab el-Mandeb, argues that the *publicanus* who farmed the Red Sea also levied the tolls at Leuke Kome mentioned in the *Periplus*. Raschke disagrees, pointing out that the assumption that Roman posts existed on the southern shores of the Red Sea is in fact erroneous.²⁰

Plocamus's sphere of operation in the *Mare Rubrum* (a term whose connotations were much wider than those of our "Red Sea") would certainly cover the entire coast of Southern Arabia ; and it would be natural enough for his freedman, engaged no doubt on his patron's business, not to confine his activities to his official district. We learn that his cargo, which was confiscated by the king of Taprobanê, included Roman denarii "among the captured money" the implication being that they were not the sole constituents of the cargo, and that other foreign coins, presumably acquired in this venture, formed some part of it and provided a basis for comparison.

17. *Periplus*, 19.

18. F.F. SCHWARZ, 1974 : 39, is of the opinion that the chief of the ambassadors was « an heir apparent in the rank of general », and conjectures that he was sent also with the purpose of exploring the strategic situation of the Romans by means of a military expert. He points out that, according to Palladius, I, 10, the people of Sri Lanka at a later date, were fully aware of the military superiority of the Romans. This is a rather farfetched example of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. E.H. WARMINGTON, 1928 : 43 and 119, believes that the embassy was sent for commercial reasons, but thinks that it did not open up direct commerce. According to him, its purpose was perhaps to confirm with Rome an arrangement with the Tamils. The reason why Warmington feels that trade relations did not improve is that Dionysius, in his *Periegesis*, 596-604, knows nothing of Taprobanê other than that it is the mother of Asian elephants and that its seaboard is infested with monstrous sea creatures. But this ignorance can be explained by Dionysius' own preference to rely on the time-honoured Hellenistic sources rather than on current material that was available and was used, for instance, by his near contemporary, Ptolemy.

19. D. MEREDITH, 1953 : 39.

20. S.J. de LAET, *Portorium*, 1943, pp. 6-7, cited by M.G. RASCHKE, 1978 : 644, n. 815, *Periplus*, 3, 19.

It has also been felt that fifteen days is far too short a time for travel from Arabia to Taprobanê. Warmington suggests that we should read XL instead of XV,²¹ for elsewhere,²² Pliny says that the normal sailing time from Arabia to India using the southwest monsoon was forty days. However, the fifteen days in the present passage should be reckoned, not from Arabia but from Carmania, i.e. the Makran Coast, and the weather was certainly not normal, since a hurricane was blowing from the north (*aquilonibus raptus*). Lionel Casson observes that a distance of 1500-1600 nautical miles (i.e. starting from Arabia) traversed in fifteen days would work out to an average speed of something over four knots, which is more or less what one would expect with winds of presumably gale force or near it.²³ Casson would reverse Warmington's suggestion and read XV (or perhaps XX) instead of XL for the duration of the monsoon navigation from Arabia to India :

« Ancient sailing craft were capable of doing between four and six knots with favourable wind in the Mediterranean as we glean from voyages Pliny himself describes ; surely, they would have done at least as well on the run to India under the southwest monsoon ; in other words, make the crossing in twenty days, half the time Pliny allows ».²⁴

Warmington also gratuitously assumes that in the adventure of the freedman we have the story of a man who did not know the use of the monsoon. But surely, the discovery of the use of monsoons could not have meant that from then on ships would no longer be caught in a wreck by adverse winds. Moreover, monsoons probably had little or nothing to do with the present case, the gales being northerly.

When Pliny represents the freedman as sailing around Arabia, that should be regarded as the fact of the matter. The question is, which way. Solinus says it was on the outward journey (*Arabiam petens*).²⁵ But this is his own interpretation of Pliny's statement. It would be more reasonable to interpret it as the return voyage from the mouth of the Persian gulf where he would actually be carried by northerly gales along and beyond the Carmanian coast.

The port in Taprobanê where the freedman landed is known to Pliny as Hippuros. This place has been identified with Kudiramalai, a haven on the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka, not far from Mantai. It lies close to a pearl bank of the same name, with remains of an ancient habitation in the locality.²⁶ The Tamil name "Kudira-malai" signifies "horse-hill", and the derivation of Hippuros, from the Greek for "horse" (*hippos*) and "hill" (*oros*) has been proposed. If this identification is correct, we have here a direct translation into Greek of a local Tamil term. This relation must have been affected at a time when the Pandya kings of South India were in a position to exploit the pearl banks of Sri Lanka for their trade with the west. But

21. E.H. WARMINGTON, 1928 : 341. The arguments of P. PARIS, 1951 : 13-27 and of E. J. ASCHER, 1970 : 10-26 and 1972 : 197, concerning the credibility of the supposed duration of the voyage have been met by J. ANDRÉ and J. FILLIOZAT, 1980 : 160, in the light of nautical information from more recent times.

22. Pliny, VI, 104.

23. L. CASSON, 1980 : 33, n. 24.

24. *Ibid.* p. 32.

25. The assumptions of F.F. SCHWARZ (1974 : 34) about the various changes of course in the freedman's outward journey are beside the point. In this connection it is interesting to note that ANDRÉ and FILLIOZAT (1980 : 161) have argued that the diversion of the freedman probably occurred in January, although March and April are not ruled out altogether. Since return journeys normally took place during the northeast monsoon, which lasts from November to April, this appears to lend some support to my belief that the freedman was on his homeward journey.

26. C.L. BROHIER, 1929 : 388-397.

it is also interesting to note that the chronicles of Sri Lanka more than once associate South Indian invaders with the trade in horses.²⁷

Pliny says that the king of Taprobanê perceived the honesty of the Romans when the captured denarii turned out to be of the same weight, although their types indicated that they were issued by different persons. This incident has often been confused with the story which Cosmas narrated about Sopatros, who convinced the king of Taprobanê with regard to the greatness of the Romans by demonstrating the superiority of the Roman coins.²⁸ It has sometimes been thought that the freedman in Pliny's account likewise impressed the king by showing him Roman coins.²⁹ But the real significance of the incident lies in the fact that these coins were seized (*captiva pecunia*), and also that they were weighed and found to be equal in weight.

Although we do not have explicit evidence from the early history of Sri Lanka, there is some reason to believe that the state had certain rites over the cargo of ships that were wrecked or cast on its territory. In narrating the wonders that accompanied the birth of Dutthagamini (2nd century B.C.), the *Mahāvamsa* says that seven ships laden with gems had arrived, and soon afterwards the arrival of a ship filled with vessels of gold, was announced to the king (*sc* of Mahagama), who instructed them to bring the precious things to him. At a much later date, a 12th century Tamil inscription of Parakramabahu from Nainativu says : « If merchant vessels are wrecked, a half share shall be taken by the treasury and the other half left to the owner ».³⁰ The denarii from the freedman's ship were, in all probability, confiscated. The coins were weighed, perhaps, because they were destined for the royal treasury.

Pliny tells us that the embassy consisted of four envoys and that its leader was called Rachia.³¹ Several derivations for this name have been proposed. Casie Chetty, for instance, conjectured that Rachia may mean "arachchiya" i.e. *arachchi*, a Sinhala designation of rank existing till modern times. In support he cited the sending of an "arachchiya" as ambassador to Portugal around 1540 A.D.³² But the identification of Pliny's Rachia with such a late official title is most unlikely.

Tennent identifies it with a term "rajah".³³ This term, in its Sinhala form (*raja*) is found in ancient inscriptions of Sri Lanka, and designates the ruler of a territory. The king of Anuradhapura was known as "Maharaja", while other subordinate rulers were called "raja". There is no evidence, however, to prove that the term by itself was used in Sri Lanka to designate an envoy or officer of state.

Recently, it has been suggested that Rachia was probably *raṭiya* or *raṭiya* a term occurring frequently in Sinhala inscriptions of the early centuries of the Christian era and denoting the administrator of a district.³⁴ These chieftains administered sub-divisions of large territories. The Labuatabandigala inscription of the fifth century A.D. speaks of a *Raṭiya Sumanaya*, while a

27. E.g. *Mahāvamsa*, XXI, 10.

28. Cosmas, XI, 17-18.

29. A. TOUSSAINT, 1966 : 35.

30. *Mahāvamsa*, XXII, 60 and 64 ; for the inscription cf. C. RASANAYAGAM, 1926 : 208-209 ; K. INDRAPALA, 1963 : 63-70.

31. It is an interesting coincidence that in the third century B.C. the embassy sent by Devanampiya Tissa to Aśoka Maurya also consisted of four envoys : chief minister, chaplain, treasurer and another minister, cf. *Mahāvamsa*, XI, 20 ff.

32. J.E. TENNENT, 1860 : 532.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *The University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon*, vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 17, n. 14. Cf. W.E. CLARKE, 1937 : 350.

rock inscription at Burutakanda in the Hambantota district mentions *Raṭiya Siva*, son of a *Raṭiya Maka*.³⁵ Thus, the title appears to refer to an administrative post, which could be inherited. We learn from these inscriptions that the *raṭiya* donated *sthupas* as well as fields, reservoirs, revenues from water rates, and money to Buddhist clergy.

The term *ratiya* or *ratika* is derived from the Pali *rattika* or *rattiya*, Sanskrit *rastrika* or *rastriya*. The Junagad rock inscription of Rudradaman uses the word *rastriya* in referring to Pushyagupta, the high commissioner of Chandragupta Maurya in Surashtra.³⁶ It is thus reasonable to assume that officials entrusted with territorial administration were sometimes engaged on diplomatic missions as well, and that the identification of Rachia with *ratiya* may be correct.

The Pali form *rattika* also occurs in a list of dignitaries in a Buddhist canonical text, namely, the *An'guttara-Nikāya*.³⁷ According to this text, *rattika* is a prince having the rank of a general and a hereditary title to the succession. Hence, Schwarz thinks that Rachia, who represented the Sinhala realm in Rome, must have been a high official, as defined by the literary statement, rather than a chieftain, as attested by the epigraphical evidence.³⁸ But the Pali text refers to conditions in North India at an earlier time, whereas the inscriptions refer to contemporary conditions in Sri Lanka. If, therefore, Rachia is to be identified with *raṭiya* (*rattika*) at all, it must be with the indigenous variety rather than any other. However, it is worth pointing out that Pliny gives Rachia as the proper name of the leader, and not as his title.

A more promising suggestion is implied in Tennent's observation that *Rakkha* (Sanskrit *Raksha*) is a name of some renown in the annals of Sri Lanka.³⁹ At a later period (12th century A.D.) Rakkha was the general whom Parakramabahu I sent to reduce the south of the island. There is also some early evidence for the use of Raksasa as a personal name in India. In the Sanskrit play *Mudra-Raksasa* by Visakadatta, Raksasa occurs as the name of one of the characters, namely, the minister of the last Nanda king, who attempts to overthrow the new rule of Chandragupta Maurya. As for the identification of Rachia with Rakkha, it would become fully acceptable only if evidence can be produced to prove that Rakkha was used as a proper name in ancient Sri Lanka.

We may also note that Rakkhita is a popular termination for Buddhist names, specially of the clergy, and that it goes back to very early times.⁴⁰ The ancient kings of Sri Lanka did, in fact, at times send Buddhist monks as envoys to foreign powers. The various missions to China during the fifth century A.D. may be mentioned in particular. Even in pre-Buddhist times a Brahmin chaplain was included among Devanampiyatissa's envoys to Aśoka.⁴¹ Aśoka's own Buddhist missionaries may have been entrusted with secular commitments as well. However, it seems reasonable to assume that Rachia himself was a layman.

From Pliny's words we can form some idea as to what sort of a man Rachia was. We are definitely told that he was at the head of the embassy, and also that his father had often gone to the land of the Seres (i.e. China).⁴² The Latin verb *comeasse* which is used in this context,

35. E. PIERIS, 1962 : 9.

36. H. RAYCHAUDHURI, 1924 : 162.

37. *An'guttara-Nikāya*, pt. 3. p. 300 ; cf. F. F. SCHWARZ, 1974 : 39.

38. F. F. SCHWARZ, 1974 : 40.

39. J.E. TENNENT, 1860 : 532 ; G.P. MALALASEKARA, 1937, s.v. "Rakkha".

40. E.g. *Mahāvamsa* XII, 4 and 5 referring to the Buddhist missionaries of Aśoka Maurya.

41. *Ibid.*, XI, 20.

42. Pliny, VI, 88.

suggests a frequent and more or less regular "going back and forth". Thus, he must have been either a merchant, who had to go there often on business, or else he was a royal envoy to that land. The first alternative appears more probable, since he is mentioned in the same breath, as it were, with the remark that the Seres were known by commerce as well. But if the second alternative is preferred, we have here a father and a son, both of whom have served as envoys abroad. This evokes the suggestion of a family inheriting some high state office which entails service as envoys of the king in foreign courts.

III. The Political and Social Conditions in Taprobanê

In an article entitled « The Roman emperor and the King of Ceylon », which appeared in 1956, Chester G. Starr has made some interesting observations regarding the account of the political and social conditions of Taprobanê, which Pliny gives on the authority of the envoys, being corroborated partially by reports of Roman merchants.⁴³ Starr was of the opinion that this description threw much more light on the political thinking of the Roman aristocracy than it did on Sinhalese political and social organization. « Even more important », he points out, « we apparently have here one of the earliest indications of the arguments used by the philosophical opposition to the first century Caesars ». Starr reminds us that at this time the Roman principate had a strong tendency in practice towards hereditary succession and autocracy, and concludes that the description of the limited, elected kingship of Sri Lanka circulated in the reign of Claudius is probably phrased to fit the Roman scene.

Starr's explanation of the political overtones of Pliny's account has much that is plausible and convincing. But one wonders whether the entire picture could have been drawn by the Roman aristocracy. As Starr himself says, it may have been tailored to their needs. But Pliny is quite positive that his information came from the ambassadors, and the eulogy of Vespasian in the preface to the *Natural history*, and that of the monetary honesty of the emperors attributed to the king of Taprobanê, show that Pliny himself, at any rate, did not share in the attitude of the « Philosophical opposition to the Caesars ».⁴⁴

It is true that the account contains elements characteristic of utopian descriptions in classical literature, and the mention of Roman merchants may be a partial justification of this. Nevertheless there are also features which doubtless belong to the political and social life of Sri Lanka in the first century A.D. comparing favourably with the evidence from indigenous sources. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the Buddhist attitude and way of life provide the background for some of the significant statements of the ambassadors and that some at least of the idealizing tendencies may have originated in Sri Lanka itself.

In this connection it must be pointed out that, like his predecessor and successor, king Bhatikabhaya, to whose reign we have attributed the embassy, is chiefly remembered for his contributions to religion and agriculture. The chronicles represent him as an extremely benevolent ruler, who not only made liberal grants to Buddhist shrines and monasteries, but also exempted his subjects from taxes which they owed him.⁴⁵ These kings of the first century A.D. had been preceded by a period of turmoil, in which, according to the *Mahāvamsa*, the rulers had

43. C.G. STARR, 1956 : 27-30.

44. Cf. ANDRÉ and FILLIOZAT, 1980 : n. 3 to Pliny, VI, 89.

45. E. LAMOTTE, 1958 : 535.

reached the lowest point of deterioration. Therefore, it is possible that, when the island was finally liberated from the corrupt rule of Anula and her minions, Buddhist thinking in Sri Lanka began to concentrate more and more on the rights and duties of kingship. This may help to explain some of the idealized statements in Pliny's account, some of whose features may in fact be traced in the political and social life of first century Sri Lanka as revealed by indigenous sources.

According to Pliny, the ambassadors reported that the king of Taprobanê was elected by the people on grounds of age and kindliness and because he had no child, and if he had a child afterwards, he would abdicate lest the kingship should become hereditary. Thirty governors were given to him by the people and no one was condemned to death except by the verdict of the majority ; even so there was the right of appeal to the people, who appointed seventy judges.⁴⁶ If these acquitted the accused, those thirty enjoyed no more respect, their disgrace being very serious. We are also told that if the king committed any crime, he would be condemned to death. But no one slays him ; they simply turn away from him and refuse to associate with him, even by speech.

It is true that these details do not correspond to what we know of kingship in the early Anuradhapura period. At this time kingship was hereditary, and appears to have passed from brother to brother, and then to the eldest brother's first son.⁴⁷ Bhatikabhaya himself succeeded his father and was succeeded by his brother.⁴⁸

However, we learn from the chronicles that the Buddhist clergy, as well as the council of ministers, had a share in matters regarding succession to the throne. Thus, in the early part of the first century B.C., after the death of Saddatissa, the *Mahāvamsa* tells us : « All the council assembled, and when they had summoned together the whole brotherhood of the Bhikkhus in the Thuparama, they, with the consent of the brotherhood, consecrated the prince Thulatthana as king, that he might take the kingdom under his protection ».⁴⁹ Concerning the elder brother the chronicle says further : « During three years did Lanjatissa use the brotherhood slightly and neglect them with the thought that they did not decide according to age ».⁵⁰ The brotherhood of monks is known as *sangha*, i.e. "community", and by a confusion of meanings in the process of interpretation the Romans, who were doubtless predisposed to such a view, may have been led to suppose that the king of Taprobanê was elected by the people as a whole.

A similar misinterpretation is perhaps at the root of the problem concerning the procedure adopted towards delinquent kings.⁵¹ The obvious meaning of *aversantibus cunctis* is that all the people turn away from the king. But suppose this applied only to the *sangha*. We know that when a king went wrong, the monks could flout him by the act of *pattanikujjana* or "turning down the bowl", signifying their refusal to accept alms. Such a procedure is sanctioned by the *vinaya* rules as an expression of the monks' disapproval of a householder's character or conduct.⁵² From a somewhat later date we have a recorded instance of this practice being actually carried out in Sri Lanka in the case of king Dhâtopatissa II (A.D. 657-658).⁵³

46. Pliny, VI, 90-91.

47. Cf. *Mahāvamsa*, XXI and XXXII-XXXVII *passim*.

48. *Ibid.*, XXXIV.

49. *Ibid.*, XXXII, 17-18.

50. *Ibid.*, XXXII, 20.

51. Pliny, VI, 91.

52. *Cullavagga* : 684-95.

53. *Mahāvamsa*, XLV, 31 ; W. RAHULA, 1956 : 68.

Even in the judicial field, where, according to Pliny, the king's power was very much restricted, Bhatikabhaya appears to have introduced some kind of reform. The *Samantapāsādikā* says that he willingly discharged on his ministers and monks his duties as head of the judiciary.⁵⁴ Having once heard of a judgement given by the Thera Abhidhammika Goda, he decided that all disputes should henceforth be handled by him.⁵⁵ On another occasion, when a controversy arose between the two monasteries, the Abhayagiri and the Mahavihara, the king assigned to his minister, the brahmin Dighakarayana, the task of settling the dispute. (Being not a Buddhist himself, he would have been likely to be neutral).

Late sources such as the Jetavanarama inscription of Mahinda IV (A.D. 964-978), inscriptions of Nissankamalla (1186-1196) and the *Pujavaliya* (13th century) stipulate that the ruler of Sri Lanka must be a *bodhisattva*, i.e. a holy person aspiring to Buddhahood.⁵⁶ These ideas may well go back to earlier times ; and if so, they may have found an echo in the "gentle disposition" which, according to Pliny, was one of the qualities expected from the king of Taprobanê.

The influence exerted by Buddhism in the lives of the people of Sri Lanka may also help to elucidate other statements of the ambassadors which have hitherto baffled commentators. For instance, Pliny represents the ambassadors as saying that, although the bulk of their wealth is greater than that of Rome, the Romans made greater use of theirs.⁵⁷ This need not be interpreted as diplomatic flattery of the Romans for making better use of their resources. It is rather a criticism of the Roman way of life. In the preceding paragraph Pliny had denounced luxury, and the implication of the present passage is that the people of Taprobanê, although they too use gold, silver, pearls and precious stones, do not indulge in luxury the way the Romans do. The details that follow immediately are meant to substantiate this point :

« no one had a slave ; no one slept into the day or during daytime : their houses stood moderately high above the ground ; the price of grain was never raised ; there were no law courts nor litigation ; Hercules was worshipped... », ⁵⁸

54. *Samantapāsādikā*, vol. 2 : 307.

55. M.W.W. WIJERATNE (1992) has identified this monk with the "Gotagataka Tisa Tera" mentioned in the Duwegala Rock Inscription (*Inscriptions of Ceylon*, vol. II, part I. *Late Brahmi Inscriptions (ICLB)*, ed. by S. Paranavitana, Colombo, 1983). This inscription records that king Lanjaka-Tissa « having built a *vihara* for the elder Gotagataka Tissa gave to this *vihara*, the two categories of revenue of tanks *Vakaravi*, *Viharavi*, *Paniitakavi* and of the channel of Kalahanagara ». Wijeratne has argued convincingly that the Lanjaka Tissa of the inscription is not the elder son of Saddatissa known to us by that name, but Bhatika Tissa (i.e. Bhatika Abhaya), and that the most likely form of the monk's name would be Gotagataka Tisa Tera — Godhagattaka Tissa Thera — the monk Abhidammika Godhatta. This monk is mentioned five times in the Pali commentaries : once in the *Papancasudani* and four times in the *Samantapasadika*, where his punctuality, his profound knowledge of the *Abhidhamma*, his proficiency in the *Vinaya* and his command of the *Tripitika* are especially highlighted.

56. W. RAHULA, 1956 : 62 ff.

57. Pliny, VI, 89.

58. Pliny, VI, 89. Some of these idealized remarks are, of course, tendentious. In particular, the absence of slaves and law-courts is not borne out by indigenous sources. The existence of slaves in the island during the early centuries of the Christian era is attested by inscriptions such as that from Ilukwewa (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, vol. IV, p. 135) assigned to this period on palaeographical grounds, which records the donation of a cave by a male slave and a female slave. The existence of law-courts, organized on a district basis, is attested by the Vevalketiya inscription (*ibid.*, vol. I, p. 245). But the remarks would appear to classical readers in the light of reports on India given previously by Onesicritus and Megasthenes, who, contrary to fact, asserted that slavery was unknown in India or in parts thereof, and pointed to the rarity of law-suits (cf. Onesicritus *apud* Strab., XV, 1, 54-55.) Ancient writers had also noted the sense of justice of the Indians in general (cf. Ctesias in Photius, *Bibl.* 46 A ; Megasthenes in Aelian V, 8, 4, 1 ; Arrian, *Ind.* IX, 13, and Diodorus, II, 36). The suggestion has

followed by the details about kingship already discussed. In short, the island is free from the evils of contemporary western society — evils that derive ultimately from the love of riches. To the ambassadors from Sri Lanka, brought up on the Buddhist principle of moderation, Roman luxury must have appeared extravagant.

A criticism of this nature would have found a place with the educated Roman reader, familiar with Hellenistic accounts of the East. The writers of these accounts were never slow to praise the simple and honest life of these distant nations. Thus, the health and longevity of the Indians was attributed, not only to the wholesomeness of the air and water in the land, but also to the simplicity of their diet, in particular their abstention from wine.

However, from the Graeco-Roman point of view, no land could be called perfect if it did not produce the vine. Although India was considered by the Greeks to be the birthplace of the wine god Dionysus, the absence of the vine there was promptly noticed. In describing the ideal conditions in Musicanus' kingdom, Onesicritus had made it a point to mention that even the vine was found there.⁵⁹ When, therefore, Pliny says that the vine is not used in Taprobanê,⁶⁰ is he merely reporting a fact, or should one see in this once more the application of a Buddhist ideal by the ambassadors? Abstention from intoxicating substances is enjoined by one of the five precepts.

Even though the absence of slaves and law courts is not borne out by local evidence, parallels can be found for some of the utopian tendencies. To take one example, long life is one of the blessings enjoyed by dwellers in classical utopian lands.⁶¹ Pliny, too, rounds off his account of Taprobanê, by saying that a human life of 100 years is there considered to be moderate.⁶² Our earliest definite evidence for the attribution of long life to the people of Taprobanê comes from Artemidorus of Ephesus (first century B.C.). Pliny, who himself quotes this evidence elsewhere,⁶³ must have found confirmation of this western notion in the account of the island's own envoys, who, almost certainly, had a better idea of other traditions as well as the actual conditions in their country.

It may be pointed out that the chronicles assert that the earliest kings of Sri Lanka, from Vijaya to Devanampiyatissa, and several after him, enjoyed reigns of quite remarkable length, forty years being not at all uncommon. The usual modern explanation has been that the chronicles have extended such reigns in order to obtain the desired synchronizations. But the appearance of this tradition of longevity in such sources as the account of the envoys from Sri Lanka, as narrated by Pliny, must be taken as an indication that the traditional account is early, and perhaps not without some justification.

been made that Indian slavery must have looked so different to a Greek observer from the slavery he knew at home that he did not recognize it for what it was. (Cf. *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. I, p. 416). As for Hercules, he was the working man's god, the ideal labourer.

59. Compare Nearchus *apud* Strab., XVI, 43-44 with Onesicritus *apud* Diod., II, 36.
60. Pliny, VI, 91 : *vitis usum non esse*.
61. Longevity was attributed to the people of the east in general : 180-200 years to the Indians (Ctesias in Photius, *Bibl.*, 47 A ; Onesicritus in Strabo, XV, 1, 34), 200 or more to the Chinese (Isigonius in Pliny, VII, 27 ; Onesicritus in Strabo, XV, 1, 37).
62. Pliny, VI, 91. A maximum figure of 150 years is given by Palladius, I, 4, who adds that on this account the inhabitants of Taprobanê are known as "the Makrobioi".
63. Pliny, VII, 2, 30. A life of 120-200 years was attributed to the Indians (Onesicritus *apud* Strab., XV, 1, 34), while the Seres who were still more remote, were thought to enjoy 200 or more. (Strabo, XV, 3, 30).

It may be objected that the references to hunting and fishing may not be in accordance with the practices of a Buddhist country. Pliny tells us that in Taprobanê feast-days are taken up in hunting, the most popular hunts being those of elephants and tigers.⁶⁴ He also mentions the great delight with which fishing is carried on, specially for turtles, whose shells give shelter to local families : for they are found of such great size. According to the evidence of the chronicles, hunting as a sport had been practised by the princes of pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. Pandukabhaya's uncles went hunting in the Dhumarakkha forest, and Devanampiyatissa's hunting expeditions to Mihintale were conducted as great picnics.⁶⁵ But one would not have expected the practice to persist after the adoption of Buddhism at the national level. However, hunting and fishing as occupations were followed by many people, specially the poor ; and the early literature of Sri Lanka contains many references to hunters and fishermen and to their settlements.⁶⁶ Inscriptions also record the levying of taxes from fish caught in works of irrigation, and the revenue from these taxes, just like that from other sources, was turned over to Buddhist temples and monasteries. Buddhism, it is true, does not encourage hunting as a sport ; in fact, it does not endorse any form of killing at all. Yet, the specific prohibition of killing by Amandagamini, the second king to follow Bhatikabhaya, seems to indicate that the practice did persist into Buddhist times ; and this prohibition had to be repeated several times thereafter.⁶⁷ Besides, we know that the animals, which Pliny mentions here, were the source of important commercial products, for which the island enjoyed great renown in ancient literature.⁶⁸ Thus, in this case too, Pliny's information may well have a basis in fact. What is strange is that as far as Pliny's report goes, the envoys do not seem to have expressed any disapproval.

From these observations it will be seen that the account of the envoys from Sri Lanka, as reported by Pliny, is largely founded on fact. Its idealizing tendency appears to be the result of the actual political situation in the island, and this aspect was doubtless taken up for elaboration by the philosophical opposition to the Roman principate. Thus, the narrative may be considered, not only as a comment on the political situation in the Rome of Claudius, but also as a document embodying the principles of good government aspired to by the benevolent rule of king Bhatikabhaya.

64. Pliny, VI, 91.

65. *Mahāvamsa*, X, 2 and XIII, 1 f.

66. W. RAHULA, 1956 : 243.

67. *Mahāvamsa*, XXXV, 6 f ; W. RAHULA, 1956 : 76.

68. Among the products of Taprobanê Ptolemy (VII, 4, 1) mentions elephants and tigers, while the *Periplus* mentions tortoise-shell. At an earlier date, Strabo (II, 1, 14 and XV, 1, 14) had mentioned ivory and tortoise-shells. Tigers were not found on the island, and A. Herrmann, 1932, s.v. "Taprobanê", suggests that leopards were meant.